



## Jesse Whitman in 1861: A New Letter

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## NOTES

### JESSE WHITMAN IN 1861: A NEW LETTER

On July 12, 1861, Walt Whitman wrote to his brother George, then enlisted in the New York 13th Regiment: "Jess is the same as usual—he works every day in the yard. He does not seem to mind the heat. He is employed in the storehouse, where they are continually busy preparing stores, provisions, to send off in the different vessels. He assists in that."<sup>1</sup> However, Jerome Loving has noted in *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* that by 1863 Jesse was "apparently homeless and often laid off as a laborer at the Brooklyn shipyard."<sup>2</sup> This unemployment is often cited as contributing to Jesse's declining mental state, leading to his eventual commission by his brother Walt to the Kings County Lunatic Asylum in December 1864. Until now, Jesse's erratic behavior would have seemed the most likely cause for his firing. However, this newly discovered draft letter by Whitman—previously noted by William White as a "prose fragment" on the verso of Whitman's 1861 manuscripts of the poem "Kentucky" in the Feinberg Collection<sup>3</sup>—reveals that Jesse's removal may have been a political firing, similar to the one his poet brother would suffer a few years later.

Here is a transcript of the draft fragment, a facsimile of which appears on the back cover of this issue of *WWQR*:

Jesse Whitman, a laboring man, in the engineer's department—has for some time been working in the provision store—was yesterday told that "his services were dispensed with."

This is to apply that he be continued in employment. He is a steady industrious man, and was strongly recommended by Mr. Kalbfleish the Mayor, and kept on by Mr. Graham, the late engineer. Can bring a request from Mr. Wall, M. C. or Mr. Humphrey, late M. C. if desired—but it is hoped that the engineer will continue him on in employment without

Though unaddressed and undated, this letter was likely sent to Samuel Livingston Breese (1794-1870), commandant "of the Brooklyn navy yard from 1859 to 1861."<sup>4</sup> Given that the addressee would apparently not know Jesse personally and is expressly not the engineer but would be in a position to reinstate his employment and might be influenced by the mayor, it seems likely that Breese was the recipient of this letter.

A number of factors point to a November 1861 composition date. First, Martin Kalbfleisch (1804-1873) served two terms as mayor of Brooklyn from 1861-1863 and 1868-1871, interrupted only by his term in Congress. He did not become "Mr. Kalbfleish, the Mayor" until the November elections. Second, William Wall (1800-1872), U.S. Representative from New York 5th District, 1861-1863, likewise was elected to office in 1861, and James Humphrey (1811-1866), U.S. Representative from 2nd District 1859-1861,

3rd District 1865-1866, left office at the same time. Finally, Charles Kinnaird Graham (1824-1889), constructing engineer of the Brooklyn navy yard, was commissioned as a colonel of Company S of the 74th New York Infantry on October 15, 1861; thus, he was not "the late engineer" of the Navy Yard until late October. Whitman's numerous mentions of newly elected public officials seems to imply that he felt Breese would be swayed by political pressure, but there is no evidence to suggest that Jesse was ever hired back by the Navy Yard. For now, it appears that Whitman's clout was not sufficient to win back a job for his troubled brother.

This letter, along with many other previously unpublished Whitman letters, will appear in my edition of *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, volume 7, to be published next year by the University of Iowa Press as part of the Iowa Whitman Series. This volume will include all Whitman letters discovered since the publication of Edwin Haviland Miller's sixth volume of *The Correspondence* (New York University Press, 1977).

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#### NOTES

- 1 *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 1:56.
- 2 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 276.
- 3 William White, "'Kentucky': Unpublished Poetic Fragments by Walt Whitman," *Prairie Schooner* 32 (Fall 1958), 172.
- 4 *Twentieth Century Biographical Dictionary of Notable Americans* (Boston: Biographical Society, 1904), vol. 1.